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Coordination, programme and other questions: international cooperation in the field of informatics

Report of the Secretary-General

Introduction

1. The present report summarizes actions taken by the United Nations Secretariat to implement Economic and Social Council resolution 1997/1 in which the Council reiterated the high priority attached to easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access for States Members of the United Nations and for observers, through, *inter alia*, their permanent missions, to the growing number of computerized databases and information systems and services of the United Nations, and requested the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics to design an overall information management strategy for the United Nations system.

I. Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics

2. In resolution 1997/1, the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics was requested, for one year, to continue to fulfil, from within existing resources, the provisions of the Council resolutions on international cooperation in information technology, and to facilitate the successful implementation of the initiatives being taken by the Secretary-General with regard to the use of information technology. As reported in the previous reports of the Secretary-General (E/1996/81 and E/1997/88), the principal vehicle for delivery of information products will continue to be the Internet.

3. The Working Group has intensified its efforts to address the needs of the permanent and observer missions to make United Nations information more easily accessible electronically and to ensure that all missions can easily connect to the Internet to obtain United Nations data. The Working Group has continued to support the use of the Internet as the basis of future development of information services to Member States. This coincides with the policy established earlier by the Information Systems Coordinating Committee (ISCC) of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, which has recommended that the United Nations and its specialized agencies use the Internet for information exchange and dissemination. The Secretary-General, in addressing the Working Group on Informatics in 1997, personally indicated his strong commitment to improving services to Member States.

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4. At its meetings, the Working Group continued to concentrate on issues that relate to the provision of better electronic access for Member States, including:

(a) The need for all Member States to have electronic connectivity, in particular via the Internet, at major United Nations locations and in their capitals, specifically in States that do not currently have this service;

(b) The need for Member States to have access to a wider range of United Nations information on economic and social issues, development, political issues and other substantive programme areas, and to have all official documents available via the Internet;

(c) The need for Member States to have efficient electronic mail links with the United Nations, its specialized agencies and with each other;

(d) The need for specialized training for the staff of missions to enable them to take advantage of the facilities being developed for Member States, in particular electronic mail and Internet Web pages;

(e) The need for access to United Nations data by means of low-cost telecommunications links, and to have facilities that will allow Member States to post speeches, commentary and other material related to United Nations proceedings electronically;

(f) The need to be advised of any other modalities (e.g., CD-ROM) whereby access can be made available to Member States to specialized databases not available on the Internet;

(g) The need to be advised of new electronic technologies being implemented by the United Nations and specialized agencies that could also be advantageous for member States, particularly video conferencing;

(h) The need to address the year 200 issue (Y2K) and bring any potential problems to the attention of member States;

(i) The need to develop an overall information management strategy to the United Nations system;

(j) The need to broaden access to information at the country level.

II. Actions taken by the Secretariat and UNDP in response to concerns raised in the Working Group

5. The Director of the Information Technology Services Division within the Office of Central Support Services of the Secretariat has served as the focal point in addressing issues related to the provision of technical and infrastructure support to member States. The Secretariat, together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has continued to operate dedicated help desk facilities for permanent and observer missions which handle any technical problems that might be encountered in using database services provided by the United Nations. In conjunction with the Secretariat, UNDP completed the Internet connectivity for all 185 permanent and observer missions in New York by July 1997, six months ahead of schedule. Management of the infrastructure on a continuing basis and day-to-day support for Internet access are currently being transferred from UNDP to the Secretariat. The process will be completed by July 1998. Similar services continue to be provided by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for permanent and observer missions that are located in Geneva.

A. Facilitating information access and dissemination to missions in New York

6. With urging from the Economic and Social Council and the Ad Hoc Working Group, in 1997 UNDP accelerated its efforts to ensure that all permanent and observer missions were connected and had access to the Internet, either through the UNDP host facilities or through other Internet service providers. For missions that were unable to connect to the Internet due to lack of computer equipment, the Secretariat provided personal computers, printers and modems. In addition, eight computers were placed in the Delegates Lounge for use by delegates.

7. Dial-up service will be provided by an outsourced vendor. To improve performance and capacity to the missions, a dedicated e-mail server and a new domain name are being provided by the Secretariat. The support services made available by the Secretariat include user support via telephone, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

B. Facilitating information access and dissemination in country locations

8. At the country level, the United Nations and UNDP pursue five objectives in information and communications technology which constitute the key elements of a "leapfrog agenda":

(a) Helping to articulate a shared vision among policy makers and decision makers and to develop requisite policies;

(b) Promoting connectivity and access;

(c) Building capacity skills among Governments, non-governmental organizations, civil society at large, the private sector and individuals;

(d) Developing content in local languages to give expression to cultural diversity, and "mining" local and grass-roots knowledge in the realm of sustainable human development;

(e) Supporting pilot projects in various sectors, including the establishment of electronic community centres/telecentres, long-distance education, support to small, medium and micro-credit enterprises, environmental management and new governance approaches involving societal groups.

9. Through a new global programme, UNDP seeks to set up pilot electronic community centres, help develop content, create means of livelihood, empower civil society (in particular women and disadvantaged groups) and sharpen vision and policies. The first pilot centres are being prepared for South Africa and Egypt, and the next ones are likely to be in India and China, later this year. UNDP is providing virtual support to all of these efforts by maintaining an extensive resource and knowledge site (http://www.undp.org/undp/info21/index.htm) which provides more than 1,000 hyperlinks to content and experience sites globally, broken down by region and development sector.

10. The Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) is a UNDP catalytic initiative to initiate networking in developing countries in order to help people share the information, knowledge and expertise that are relevant to sustainable development. Initially launched in 12 countries in 1992 as a follow-up programme to chapter 40 of Agenda 21, SDNP currently offers assistance in establishing connectivity to national networks and the Internet, providing and aggregating content and knowledge, and training users. To date, some 41 country-specific centres are operating in all regions, and with support from the Internet Initiative for Africa, activities in Africa have accelerated significantly.

11. SDNP has recently been directed to give high priority to creating the Small Island Developing States Network (SIDSnet). This involves the creation of an Internet server capable of providing Internet-based communication tools to a network of developing island countries and 36 small island developing States. The site will cover the same issues as SDNP relating to sustainable development. Solutions that work for one island can easily be shared over the network and made available for implementation and adaptation by another island.

12. The Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC) in UNDP has introduced initiatives aimed at building the national capacity of TCDC focal points to use state-of-the-art information technology tools for the effective promotion of technical cooperation in the framework of South/South cooperation. The initiatives are formulated in close collaboration with agencies, both within and outside UNDP (e.g., the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and SDNP), that provide assistance to developing countries in the use of information technology. Significant interventions include support to the Regional Prevention of Maternal Mortality network, headquartered in Ghana; to the launching of the Microfin Afric network, headquartered in Senegal; and to the TCDC focal points for Asia and the Pacific, who met in Singapore in January 1998. The establishment of content-based national TCDC Web pages is an important feature of the initiatives, and their full implementation would enable the Unit to break new ground for the accelerated use of TCDC in at least 40 countries over the next few years.

13. The Asia/Pacific Development Information Programme (APDIP), which covers 42 Asian/Pacific countries through 24 UNDP country offices, is designed to create awareness about how information technology can foster social and economic development and assist host Governments in the formation of suitable policies. UNDP will build up the capacity of programme countries to benefit from existing and future information and communications technology programmes. It also intends to expand Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) projects by interfacing with other United Nations and UNDP national and regional programmes and activities. An APDIP office has been established in Malaysia, and Mongolia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Malaysia and Viet Nam have signed the programme document. A series of information technology seminars, tailored to non-technical, key governmental officers of countries in the region who are in a position to influence or decide information and

communications technology policies for their countries, is to be organized in 1998.

C. Electronic dissemination of United Nations information via the United Nations Internet Web server and other related Web facilities

14. The United Nations and its specialized agencies disseminate information through the Internet in various ways. They have opted to develop most of their information services for the Web format rather than utilizing the somewhat obsolete Gopher format. This approach was endorsed by the Informations Systems Coordination Committee (ISCC) and approved by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC).

15. Under the auspices of ISCC, the United Nations system Web locator became operational, and the United Nations International Organizations Network Search (UNIONS) engine for improved retrieval was launched.

16. The United Nations home page has been designed to allow for expansion to include almost all areas of interest relating to the United Nations, with links to the Web sites of the specialized agencies and other organizations of the system. Additional links have been established directly between the home page and the documentation of the General Assembly (with a new interface), Security Council, a nd the Secretary-General's speeches. The range and scope of information on the multilingual Web site (www.un.org) has been significantly enhanced. United Nations press releases have now been moved from obsolete mainframe format to the home page. Daily briefings, highlights and information on the meetings of various United Nations bodies are also available. Constant situation reports provide up-to-date information on crisis and emergencies; they are particularly valuable for relief agencies and similar organizations. Further, the search facility has been improved to carry out full-text searches of press releases, documents and other databases. The Department of Public Information continues to coordinate the Interdepartmental Working Group on Internet Matters and monitor the development of the United Nations Web site.

17. During 1996, the United Nations home page was accessed a total of 11.5 million times. In 1997, the number increased to 42 million. The page was accessed 6 million times in February 1998 alone, the highest number for any month. This translates into over 150 requests served every minute – 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This clearly indicates that the United Nations Internet presence is an important channel of communication.

18. The United Nations has been striving to make full use of the opportunities provided by the Internet, including enhancement of outreach for the traditional channels of communication. On 2 April 1997 the Secretary-General took part, for the first time, in a live international radio interview, also carried on the Web, in which he responded to questions originating in different parts of the world.

19. The Department of Public Information has taken a big step forward in the field of electronic information by launching its new audio-visual page on the United Nations Web site in March 1998. The audio-visual page will add multimedia functionality and attractiveness to the Web site. United Nations radio programmes in English and French are already available in audio format through the Internet. The video of the general debate of the General Assembly at its fifty-second session was Web-cast live on the Internet as a pilot project via the United Nations Web site. This was possible through special arrangements with an Internet service provider at no cost to the Organization. A total of 5,216 users viewed the live and/or archived statements. A user survey, asking for comments and suggestions was forwarded, in both printed and electronic formats, to the permanent missions. The responses were compiled, and the suggestions received have been implemented on the Web sites.

20. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library has introduced new features on its home page, including services designed to assist users of United Nations documentation. *United Nations Documentation: Research Guide* is an on-line guide to the structure, organization and use of United Nations documents, and *Documents Alert* is a service calling attention to important new documents issued by the Organization. New bibliographies have been added to the Library's other research guides, including a bibliography of French-language resources about the United Nations and a bibliography on water resources in the Middle East. Maps of the current peacekeeping missions have been posted on the Web site, with appropriate linkages to the substantive pages of the missions. The number of databases has been expanded to include, in particular, the *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, the United Nations *Treaty Series*, UN-I-QUE (a reference file created by the Library), InfoNation (statistical information on various indicators of Member States), an audio-visual catalogue, and a database on landmines.

21. Because of the increased accessibility of databases on the World Wide Web, the Library is able to provide, for the first time, remote access to 100 per cent of its client base,

regardless of physical location. It initiated the formation of the United Nations Consortium for sharing the cost of site licences to access external on-line information services of cross-organizational interest, delivered through the Internet. The United Nations Consortium now has 18 members from the United Nations system and its specialized agencies, with remote access to electronic services, such as Oxford Analytica and NewsEdge.

22. As a result of this initiative, arrangements have been made to provide all permanent missions in New York, at no cost, with remote access to NewsEdge, the live-time news feed, to the entire contents of the Economist Intelligence Unit Internet database, and to Xchange, a desktop product of Lexis-Nexis, containing news, industry news, company financial and personnel statistics, industry forecasts, and in-depth company and market information. The free access to Xchange has been provided until 31 December 1998; thereafter, if a permanent mission wishes to continue the service, a volume-driven, reduced subscription rate would be charged.

23. The United Nations CyberSchoolBus, developed as a learning tool for students and teachers, has been particularly successful. Through vast networks of schools and organizations, the CyberSchoolBus disseminates its information to thousands of schools and educators every week. Interactions between the students, educators and the United Nations experts were scheduled during 1997 through the Internet.

24. Customized delivery of information by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library via e-mail throughout the United Nations system continues to expand. In 1997, over 1.7 million items were transmitted to over 3,000 delegates and staff members. Based on the experience of the Library in New York, the Library at the United Nations Office in Geneva is in the process of providing similar service to the permanent missions locate there.

D. Optical Disk System

25. Since the establishment of the Optical Disk System (ODS) in 1993, there has been an exponential growth in the number of users, first among the permanent and observer missions to the United Nations at Headquarters and then in Government capitals. As of March 1998, there were more than 4,500 users worldwide, including 327 users at permanent missions in New York, Geneva and Vienna, and 202 users in the foreign ministries of member States.

26. The United Nations Office at Vienna was added to the ODS network last year and has been inputting documents daily since April 1997. A similar project to integrate offices away from Headquarters, starting with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and ECA, is under way.

27. More than 340,000 documents are available on-line, seven days a week, including:

(a) All United Nations parliamentary documentation since 1993 in all official languages;

(b) Resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council since 1946;

(c) A number of the official records of the four main bodies since 1946;

(d) Administrative issuances of the Secretariat.

28. Access to the Optical Disk System by Internet users became available when a Web server interface was put into operation in November 1996. Since June 1997, all permanent missions are connected to the Internet and can access documents stored there, both for their own use and for electronic transmission to capitals.

29. A project to further increase the capacity of ODS and upgrade its technological infrastructure is in the planning stage in the Information Technology Services Division. The project will be a part of the Secretary-General's strategy for the creation of an "electronic United Nations", as announced in his report entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950, paras. 244-247). The Optical Disk System and the Internet are the keystones for making available, at low unit cost, information of high quality to a vastly broader audience in member States.

E. Provision of electronic mail to permanent and observer missions

30. The remote use of the United Nations electronic mail network by permanent and observer missions allows missions to communicate with the United Nations, with UNDP offices worldwide and with each other. The facility also allows missions to send mail to and receive mail from any individual or organization which has an Internet address. The United Nations Secretariat continues to improve the performance and availability of its electronic mail service, which is accessible through Internet browsers. The facility was equipped with features which now automatically detect

problems and restore operations when the system malfunctions.

F. Specialized Internet training given to the staff of missions

31. In order for member States to utilize Internet services for their own dissemination of information, the Working Group requested that the United Nations Secretariat continue to provide training courses for permanent and observer missions on use of the Internet. Training courses on Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Web page design are also offered to personnel of the permanent and observer missions. In total 372 staff of the missions were trained in 1997 and 1998.

32. A workshop on Web site management was conducted by the Department of Public Information for staff at the Secretariat and UNDP. Special presentations and briefings were organized for staff of the permanent and observer missions, non-governmental organizations, United Nations national associations, and student groups, to familiarize users with the Internet and access to the United Nations home page. In addition, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library continues to offer CyberSeek training to delegates and staff of permanent and observer missions. The training focuses on retrieving and downloading relevant information from the Internet, with particular reference to sources important to international organizations. The Library also offers training sessions in the use of the Optical Disk System.

G. Internet publishing for missions

33. In 1997 and 1998, UNDP continued to provide technical support and host facilities for those missions wishing to publish their own Web pages. An increasing number of missions took advantage of the service. With the scheduled transfer of mission technical support to the United Nations Secretariat in April 1998, a dedicated server will be installed on the home pages of missions.

H. Databases and information available on CD-ROM

34. A number of CD-ROMs and electronic products are available from the Sales and Marketing Section of the Department of Public Information, which also maintains lists of other electronic products available from various offices of the United Nations. On-line information services continue to be available from the Library, both at the External Collection Reference Desk and in the Woodrow Wilson Reading Room.

35. A first CD-ROM containing Security Council documents is nearing completion. The English version will be followed by a French version. A facility to produce CD-ROM products from the Optical Disk System on an ongoing basis and, eventually, on demand is being set up; it will be fully implemented by the Information Technology Services Division in 1998. To facilitate access to UNDP Web information, UNDP provided participants of the Global Knowledge conference (Toronto, 1997) with a CD-ROM copy of its Web pages, free of charge.

I. The year 2000 problem

36. The Working Group is considering a number of steps for building awareness among member States and permanent and observer missions of the seriousness of the year 2000 problem. Not only software is at stake; practically all equipment that uses a date function will be affected. A special page on the United Nations Web site containing relevant information has been established. On its resources and knowledge Web site, UNDP provides a separate and extensive section on the problem and its possible impact on developing countries.

37. Internally, the United Nations is addressing the problem on various fronts. A consulting firm is being contracted to study the situation at the Secretariat, prepare an impact analysis and make specific recommendations. Through the Information Technology Services Division, all application development areas in the Secretariat are being made aware of the need to review application software that handles date-sensitive functions and to avoid potential difficulties either by re-programming or by replacing the software with compliant packages.

38. Infrastructure components including computer hardware and operating systems are being replaced with new equipment and software that have been certified to be compliant with the date change. This covers all personal computers that have migrated to the Windows'95 operating system, the local area network servers and all desktop software delivered centrally to all users. All major administrative applications have already been replaced or are in the process of being replaced by the Integrated Management Information System (IMIS), which is fully compliant.

39. The IBM mainframe, located in the International Computing Centre (ICC) in Geneva is being reconfigured with a new operating system which is compliant with the year 2000. All mainframe software will be tested on this new platform to ascertain its functioning in the new environment.

J. Information management strategy for the United Nations system

40. As requested in paragraph 7 of Council resolution E/1997/1, the Working Group has addressed the question of the design of an overall information management strategy for the United Nations Secretariat and specialized agencies. The matter was repeatedly discussed in Working Group meetings, comments were requested from the Information Systems Coordination Committee, and experts made presentations on the topic. An informal sub-working group was established to identify key points that should be addressed by a strategy and propose an inter-agency approach for developing and implementing it.

III. Concluding remarks

41. The Secretariat expects that expansion of electronic information services to the member States will continue during the 1998-1999 biennium. Additional United Nations information will be made available, under the guidelines established by the Interdepartmental Coordinating Group on Internet Matters. Now that universal access to missions is becoming a reality, the focus of the development of services to member States is expected to shift to the expansion of the information base to include significantly more information.